

# Designing dialogue: Argumentation as conflict management in social interaction<sup>1</sup>

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The escalation of disagreement into overt conflict in social interaction can be avoided, if disagreement is managed through argumentative dialogue. This paper explores the characteristics of argumentative dialogue and presents the role of third parties who design spaces for others' dialogue. After discussing the prototypical example of dispute mediators, this contribution considers other informal third parties who have a similar role. This opens up a new perspective on informal third parties who work as designers of dialogue and build spaces to manage disagreement in social interaction.

## 1. Introduction

There is a widespread feeling in our society that we have arrived at an era of political and social turmoil, in which political engagement seems more influenced by polemical fighting than by collaboration and reasonable dialogue. Recent confused political campaigns followed by confusing votes (such as the Brexit and the 2016 US election, to name but two) exacerbate that feeling and raise an urgent question: in the face of different ideas and positions, is it still possible to discuss and debate in a *reasonable* way? Is there any possibility of approaching differences through dialogue, considering opposing positions, and carefully weighing arguments on both sides? Or are we bound to entrench polarised positions, every time we voice a disagreement?

Similarly, at a micro-level, one might feel disheartened when disagreement occurs in interpersonal social interactions. Any time two persons disagree, as will happen in any relationship, inevitably the question arises: will that relationship founder as a consequence of the disagreement?

It is evident that any disagreement has the potential to escalate into overt or even violent conflict. Metaphors such as the conflict *ladder* (Glasl 2004) have been employed to describe the phenomenon of a simple misunderstanding or difference of opinion deteriorating into hostile interpersonal conflict (Greco Morasso 2011); in some cases, this can even turn into *intractable* conflict (Bar-Tal 2013).

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I have adopted the metaphor of *design-architecture* as applied to communication and dialogue from Aakhus (2007), Jackson (2015a, 2015b), Perret-Clermont (2015).

This paper argues that the escalation of disagreement into conflict is neither necessary nor inevitable. If we want to maintain and reinvigorate social relationships, it is crucial to understand how to deal with disagreement through dialogue. Creating a space for argumentative dialogue helps solve disagreement in a reasonable fashion, promotes quality communication in social interaction and restores broken relationships. In this sense, argumentation offers a means of reasonably managing disagreement in social interaction.

## 2. Argumentative dialogue

In this paper, argumentation is seen as a social and dialogic process of discussion. From this perspective, an ideal argumentative discussion is aimed at the resolution of a *difference of opinion* between individuals (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984). Resolving a difference, in this model, means making a well-founded decision based on the merits of the case, having taken into account the viewpoints and arguments of all parties in an ideally reasonable dialogue<sup>2</sup>. In this, argumentation can be seen as an alternative to the escalation of conflict and a means of managing disagreement in social interaction.

Not every type of dialogue produces this effect; it is unique to an *argumentative* dialogue. The main features of argumentative dialogue are set out briefly below.

Firstly, each party must accept that his or her position on a given subject is not the only possible one; and that there might be alternative positions. This capacity to accept that people have different perspectives is called *decentration* (cf. the discussion in Muller Mirza et al. 2009). Accepting that there might be different viewpoints on a subject does not imply acceptance of relativism. Argumentative dialogue is best understood within the framework of a moderate socio-constructivism; this position acknowledges that reality is always complex and, therefore, facts are always interpreted and, to some extent, co-constructed through social interaction. Particularly in the case of conflict, it might be that different parties see different aspects of a complex problem, as they experience their own individual, differing stories of the conflict and, more often than not,

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<sup>2</sup> This represents the description of an *ideal* argumentative discussion. Argumentation is seen as a constellation of speech acts functional to the resolution of a difference of opinion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004). This does not mean that argumentative dialogue always results in a complete resolution of the difference; nor do parties always behave in a reasonable way. Normative models of argumentation, such as the one proposed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004), offer a blueprint of how argumentation should unfold if parties want to solve their disagreement on its merits. Real-life discussions can be compared to this ideal standard, in order to understand how much they have been based on argumentation, and how much they were conducive to the resolution of a difference of opinion. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

simply ignore certain aspects of the other's story. This explains why different viewpoints emerge.

Secondly, the difference of opinion is not seen as a problem in argumentation; on the contrary, differences of opinion are *not the endpoint but the starting point of dialogue*. Some authors speak of *collaborative* argumentation to indicate a "reasoned collective handling of disagreement" (Schwarz & Baker 2017: 134, footnote 1): in this view, argumentative dialogue is a means of reaching a common reasoned resolution of disagreement. Ideally, in argumentative dialogue, the difference is a positive; and the other person, who brings a different (contradictory) perspective, is a resource. Indeed, differences potentially allow the parties involved to take a step forward in cognitive and relational terms (see the studies on the phenomenon of socio-cognitive conflict; in particular, Carugati & Perret-Clermont 2015).

Thirdly, argumentative dialogue entails that all parties adopt a *critical* attitude. This means that parties try to find a *reasonable* solution to their disagreement. The adjective *reasonable*, in this context, assumes a meaning broader than merely rational: in complex decision-making processes, such as those typical of social interaction, there are many aspects to be pondered with a nuanced attitude. Reasonableness in argumentation includes taking into account the parties as human beings – people, with emotions and feelings – in the bigger picture of a decision. But being reasonable in argumentation also means being critical and evaluating all positions, considering all relevant aspects. Agreement in argumentative dialogue is achieved through the resolution of a difference of opinion *on the merits of the case* (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984) rather than through manipulation, deception or violence. Consequently, participants will subject their opinions to critical scrutiny and put forward arguments to support their positions rather than merely enunciating those positions; and they will be ready to change their opinion, if persuaded to do so.

Approaching disagreement through argumentation, i.e. in a critical way, is the only way to really *resolve* it. When a resolution is reached through other means – for example, if a boss (or a teacher!) imposes a decision without explaining it, or if someone surreptitiously coerces someone else into conceding a point by means of threats – disagreement will remain. Even if the parties settle the specific problem, if the disagreement has not been tackled through reasonable dialogue, it will persist. In fact, whoever has been forced into doing something, or has been deceived, will not be *persuaded* to accept the other's position<sup>3</sup>. In the long run, a relationship in which disagreement is papered over or hidden but never quite resolved will inevitably deteriorate. Parties will hold on to a tacit disappointment; this is a heavy burden for social relationships and one that

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<sup>3</sup> In this sense, compliance with a proposal is not a measure of its reasonableness.

erodes trust. By contrast, research on conflict resolution has proven that solutions achieved in mediation, because they take the parties' interests into account, are more durable (see for example Mitchell 2003; Kelman 2009: 75).

It is worth noting that the critical attitude promoted through argumentative dialogue is not an abstract, cognitive and "cold" solution, as opposed to a nuanced appreciation of human relationships. On the contrary, when the resolution of a difference of opinion happens through argumentative dialogue, the human relationship between the parties will improve (Bush & Folger 1994): parties, in fact, will have learnt how to deal with differences and how to solve problems through reasonable discussion (Greco Morasso 2011). Kressel (2006: 730) describes the ameliorative impact of mediation (on relationships), which has been proven in different fields. For example, he refers to studies in environmental mediation, in which respondents report "improvements in their capacity to discuss controversial issues, to work more productively with the others, and to resolve differences more easily" (Dukes 2004, q.td in Kressel 2006: 730). Comparable findings are reported in labour disputes and divorce mediation (see the discussion in Kressel 2006: 730)<sup>4</sup>.

Ultimately, argumentative dialogue allows for relationships to become more solid. This is reflected in some dialogue-based approaches to conflict resolution being described as *transformative* approaches (see Folger & Bush 1994). These approaches acknowledge that learning how to solve disagreement through dialogue means not only solving one specific problem, but improving the way of approaching problems in general; and, thus, improving the human relationships that have been affected by those problems. As a consequence, parties feel more confident and able to disagree in a constructive way without fear of losing their relationships with their opponents (be they spouses, friends, colleagues, or others).

### 3. Designing spaces for argumentative dialogues

In many situations and contexts, argumentative dialogues of the type described in section 2 arise naturally as part of conversations (see for example Schär & Greco 2016). Nonetheless, there are cases where parties are not able to engage in an argumentative discussion for a variety of reasons. For example, their common starting points might be too limited; or their disagreement might be too strong or too escalated for them to handle by themselves. In these cases, a well-designed intervention by a third party who designs a space for argumentative

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<sup>4</sup> These positive results for relationships have been proven despite the fact that it is not easy to find indicators to measure mediation outcomes, as these might involve different aspects in the short and long term (see the discussion in Herrman, Hollett & Gale 2006: 46-47).

dialogue can help. The concept of *communication design* in argumentation has recently attracted scholarly attention (Aakhus 2007; Jackson 2015a, b). In the words of Jackson (2015: 227), "a design perspective suggests that societies try out ideas about how to reach conclusions and agreements embodying them in techniques and technical systems". Jackson (2015a) notes that every argumentative setting or practice is partially the result of design hypotheses. When these no longer fit the ecology of a context, "it is also possible to engage in theoretically motivated redesign of argumentation" (Jackson 2015b: 244). The design perspective, we might say, has the merit of showing that it is not a given that argumentative dialogue will develop in a healthy way: more often than not, spaces for dialogue are (at least partially) designed. Therefore, it is possible to reflect on how functional they are and how they can be improved.

Similarly, studies in socio-cultural psychology have made the case for the necessity of designing safe spaces for social interaction and dialogue. In order to clarify this concept, Perret-Clermont (2015) introduces the metaphor of the "architecture of social relationships": third parties build spaces to improve socio-cognitive dialogical exchanges in social interaction. Grossen & Perret-Clermont (1992: 288) speak of these third parties in terms of being the "guardians" of safe spaces for thinking and social interaction.

### 3.1 *Mediators as architects of argumentative dialogue*

An exemplary case of dialogue design is the work that dispute mediators do in dealing with conflicts without imposing a solution on them. Mediators create a space for argumentative discussion. Discursive and argumentative approaches to dispute mediation have the "value of looking closely at actual talk" (Glenn & Susskind 2010: 118) and enable us to look at micro-patterns of discourse in interaction (Putnam 2010: 153). These micro-approaches explain how communicative micro-choices made by mediators impact on the construction of a dialogical space for the parties involved.

Research on argumentation in mediation has highlighted various aspects through which a mediator constructs the parties' dialogical space. The first aspect is the management of the issues under discussion (see for example Aakhus 2003). Mediators organise the issues around which the parties' discussion will develop. They rule out discussion that is not conducive to a reasonable solution of the conflict or that will result in an impasse (Aakhus 2003). They lead the parties through an in-depth analysis of their conflict, rejecting unproductive deviations from a resolution-oriented discussion and identifying the issues that lie at the origin of the conflict (Greco Morasso 2011). In a more advanced phase of mediation, they bring the parties to a discussion about the options for conflict resolution, purposefully shifting the discussion from the origin of the conflict to its resolution (Greco Morasso 2011).

Because of their neutral role, mediators cannot advance argumentation on how to solve the parties' conflict directly. Nevertheless, it has been shown that they often advance argumentation at a meta-level: they use argumentation to convince disputants that the conflict is worth resolving; or persuade reluctant parties to orientate their discussion towards one or several particular issues (Greco Morasso 2011). They use *questions* and *formulations* to guide the discussion whilst avoiding direct advocacy for one position or another (van Eemeren et al. 1993). More recent research demonstrates how mediators design the parties' discussion by selecting a zone of initial agreement based on appropriate starting points (van Bijnen, in preparation), which set the stage for the parties' argumentation. Other studies explain how *reframing*, i.e. modifying the parties' original interpretation of the conflict, is used strategically by mediators within the construction of the parties' argumentative discussion for the resolution of their conflict (Greco 2016; Martinez Soria, in preparation).

The case of mediators is a clear instance of how a third neutral party might intervene in the design of argumentative spaces. All the interventions described above show that the mediator is a non-canonical participant in an argumentative discussion (Greco Morasso 2011) or, in other words, a designer of the others' discussion. As a rule, architects and designers prepare spaces for others to inhabit. In this case, it is a dialogical space that is designed for others to find a solution to their conflict through reasonable dialogue.

### 3.2 *Mediators with no label*

Unlike dispute mediators, not all designers of dialogue have a specific label. There are cases in which the design of the others' discussion for the management of disagreement goes unnoticed. This task is part and parcel of different professional profiles, as for example in the case of teachers, social workers or other facilitators<sup>5</sup>. Students or other parties will learn to deal with disagreement in a reasonable fashion to the extent that these "mediators without a label" have been able to create dialogical spaces for them to handle their disagreement. For example, through a decades-long research and training programme in the UK, Neil Mercer and colleagues have shown the importance of dialogical spaces in the classroom and other educational contexts (see Dawes, Mercer & Wegerif 2004; Higham 2016; Hennessy et al. 2016). They have proved that a careful design of the rules and contexts for interaction enable what they call *exploratory talk* (Littleton and Mercer 2013), which is very close to the concept of argumentative dialogue outlined in this paper. The role of the

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<sup>5</sup> On this point, see Greco, Mehmeti & Perret-Clermont (2017), who suggest the comparison between teachers and dispute mediators as regards their role in constructing argumentative discussions for others.

teacher is fundamental, as he or she is "someone who can use dialogue to orchestrate and foster the development of a community of enquiry in the classroom in which individual students can take a shared, active and reflective role in building their own understanding" (Mercer & Littleton 2007: 74). In a different context, Psaltis, Carretero and Čehajić-Clancy (2017) discuss the role of history education in conflict transformation; amongst other aspects, they explore the role of teachers who guide this process. These findings open new perspectives on the role of informal third parties who work as architects of dialogue.

#### **4. Conclusions and openings**

This paper has argued that, in social interaction, there is room for a formal or informal dialogue design operated by third parties who create spaces for others' discussion. Whether created through the work of professional mediators or through the intervention of other facilitators, these spaces ideally allow for the management of disagreement through argumentative dialogue, avoiding escalation into interpersonal conflict. Thus, if well managed, disagreement may contain a positive potential for the development of social interaction.

This paper has taken the role of mediators as a prototype of the design work necessary to create the possibility for others to engage in argumentative dialogue. Although this paper, for reasons of space, has not delved into specific analyses, most of the results presented in sections 3.1 and 3.2 are based on empirical, interaction-based research that takes into account micro-sequences of dialogue, often through a discursive analytical lens. This type of approach permits a nuanced view of the different discursive elements that concretely facilitate the creation of dialogical spaces. In this sense, the research that has been conducted on argumentative dialogue in mediation (section 3.1) could serve as a blueprint for other domains of dialogue design. Indeed, some of the discursive strategies identified in the case of mediators could be of use in understanding how to design dialogical spaces in other social contexts and professional domains.

#### **Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their comments, which have helped improve this manuscript; and to Judy Nagle for language editing.

I would also like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for grant n. 10001C\_170004, which supports the project "The inferential dynamics of reframing within dispute mediators' argumentation" (Applicant: S. Greco, PhD researcher: C. Martinez Soria). Some of the recent advances in the research on dispute mediation discussed in this paper have been possible thanks to this support.

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